

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Arts - Papers (Archive)

Faculty of Arts, Social Sciences & Humanities

2009

Utopias of violence: Pierce's knights of Tortall and the contemporary heroic

Anne L. Melano

University of Wollongong, amelano@uow.edu.au

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#), and the [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Melano, Anne L., Utopias of violence: Pierce's knights of Tortall and the contemporary heroic 2009.
<https://ro.uow.edu.au/artspapers/1767>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

CROSSROADS

An interdisciplinary journal for the study
of history, philosophy, religion and classics

SPECIAL ISSUE – 2008 RHIZOMES CONFERENCE

VOLUME III ISSUE II 2009

ISSN: 1833-878X

Pages 89-98

Anne Melano

Utopias of Violence: Pierce's Knights of Tortall and the Contemporary Heroic

ABSTRACT

Within each of the heroic genres there lies a further possibility, less often explored; that of a society of heroes - in its ideal form, an heroic utopia. Medievalist fantasy works are a particularly rich source of idealised heroic societies. Despite their considerable popularity, leading medievalist fantasy works have been dismissed as reactionary, consolatory or promulgating a masculinist monomyth. The idealised heroic in Pierce's *Protector of the Small* quartet draws heavily on earlier heroic and medievalist traditions and yet presents contemporary concerns. The novels are set within a male-dominated society while depicting women and girls in powerful, society-changing roles. It seems that the heroic, while it may be a received mode, is not a single story, and that disruption to tradition can be as significant as continuity.

BIOGRAPHY

Anne Melano graduated from the MA(Honours) program in English literature at Macquarie University in 2006. Her interests include utopian fictions, fantasy otherworld fictions, and the formation of discursive fields within critical analysis. She works at the University of Wollongong.

UTOPIAS OF VIOLENCE: PIERCE'S KNIGHTS OF TORTALL AND THE CONTEMPORARY HEROIC

Although Western culture increasingly suppresses violent expression in daily living, heroic violence continues to suffuse our genre fictions. Heroic violence is not merely a possibility available to texts—it is embedded at a structural level as a dominant aesthetic mode. Jameson's definition of a *mode* is more than satisfied by this profusion:

For when we speak of a mode, what can we mean but that this particular type of literary discourse is not bound to the conventions of a given age, nor indissolubly linked to a given type of verbal artifact, but rather persists as a temptation and a mode of expression across a whole range of historical periods, seeming to offer itself, if only intermittently, as a formal possibility which can be revived and renewed?ⁱ

The hero who appears in genre fiction is typically antagonistic to violence (other people's), a practitioner of violence, and glorified or redeemed by violence. 'Heroic genres' is not used here as code for 'romance'; some heroic genres are realist genres. Although the last century may have seen new types of heroic genre come to the fore (cop stories) and others fade away (colonialist stories), the enthusiasm for heroic violence is neither new nor fading.

While it is true that some heroic genre fiction is highly derivative and unreflectively replicates cultural stereotypes, it seems too simplistic to argue that this is always the case. More thoughtful genre writers deliberately and consciously explore the peace-violence continuum to draw attention to the limits and problems of violence. Some few go further, presenting a coherent and idealised account of heroic violence and its correct functioning within a society of warriors. In other words, they describe a utopia—a utopia, as it were, of violence.

The medievalist fantasy novel offers a particularly rich literary vein of this ideal heroic. In the contemporary period from WWII to the present, the genre has been energised by the publication and success of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* (1954–1955). Ideal warrior groups have central functions within some of medievalist fantasy novels; examples are Tolkien's Dúnedain, Anne McCaffrey's dragon riders of Pern, and Ursula Le Guin's earlier depictions of the wizards of Roke. Although individual heroes continue to be depicted, such heroic orders necessarily extend heroism from individuals to other members of the order. In a parallel movement, the goals of heroism shift away from the personal and towards social value. For example, the Dúnedain's status as ideal warriors is affirmed by their protection of the Shire. These texts approach utopian narratives insofar as they choose to show the inner workings of an ideal heroic; that is, the details of the education, government, beliefs and practices of the warriors.

'Medievalist' here implies creative use of tropes associated with representations of the medieval, rather than a commitment to depict any actual part of Western medieval history. Medievalist works may be set in any time period and in any place, including other planets. Frequently, medieval representations are mixed with other elements in the textual stew. Fictions such as Tamora Pierce's *Protector of the Small* quartet continue to depict a colourful, feudal greenwold, inhabited by noble warriors, evil lords and magical creatures, but also by machines.

The association of these texts with a romanticised feudal past and their continuity with traditional romance narratives have led fantasy critics to question whether these texts have contemporary relevance. Three main types of this critical objection can be identified. The first objection relates directly to the uses of the past. While it may seem obvious that texts largely written and consumed in the late 20th and early 21st centuries are speaking of and to our times, within fantasy criticism this has been seriously contested. Prominent critics have had concerns around the way these works source their iconography from what appears to be romanticised medievalism. The idealised past is interpreted as representing the old, repressive order, and numerous authors of medievalist fantasy have been branded as conservatives who yearn for a return to a rigid class system. Rosemary Jackson provides a leading example of this when she claims that the romance tradition supports a ruling ideology and manifests a desire for a feudal order, singling out Tolkien in particular.ⁱⁱ While recognising that there is a dialogue between medievalist fantasy and modernity, the relationship is painted as one in which the fantasy turns its back against modernity rather than addressing it. Any possibility of contemporary relevance is therefore denied.

The second objection is that these works are mere consolation or distraction. Some critics fear that fantasy offers a consolatory sop for the dissatisfied, encouraging passivity and diverting the reading subjects from actively addressing social problems.ⁱⁱⁱ A simpler and perhaps more prevalent form of this objection constructs

medievalist fantasy as an escapist golden age, a naïve, deluded imagining of pre-industrial society as a pleasant retreat from modernity. These arguments function as a kind of cultural banishment to the land of irrelevance.

The third objection comes from a belief in a monomyth. If it is true that there is a single dominant heroic ideal, then there can be no claim that the presence of heroic ideals can be said to fulfil a specific function in a given time and place. Joseph Campbell famously argues that there is one hero's journey, and identifies its elements, including a mythological separation, initiation and return. He claims that the heroic transcends culture.^{iv} Margery Hourihan is an example of a critic who identifies a monomyth within Western culture, in her case for the purposes of opposing its truth value. She points to a tradition of masculine "hero stories," which include fantasy fiction, and which have mythologised white male hegemony from the times of the oral epics right through to the present day:

In Western culture there is a story which has been told over and over again, in innumerable versions, from the earliest times. It is a story about superiority, dominance and success. It tells how white European men are the natural masters of the world because they are strong, brave, skilful, rational and dedicated. It tells how they overcome the dangers of nature, how other 'inferior' races have been subdued by them, and how they spread civilization and order wherever they go. It tells how women are designed to serve them, and how those women who refuse to do so are threats to the natural order and must be controlled. It tells how their persistence means that they always eventually win the glittering prizes, the golden treasures, and how the gods—or the government—approve of their enterprises. It is our favourite story and it has been told so many times that we have come to believe that what it says about the world is true.^v

It is certainly true that utopias of violence have a long tradition in literature. Well-known examples include the tales of Homer, the heroic society described in *Beowulf* as well as the Arthurian/chivalric cycles. However, by concentrating on similarity in heroic tales rather than difference, and continuity rather than disruption to tradition, this objection makes it hard to bring into view what might be particular about the heroic ideal in our times.

The function of all these arguments is essentially one of disposal. They elide the possibility that medievalist fantasy may speak meaningfully to or of the present. Yet this genre is a popular cultural product of our times and therefore as a discursive formation it would seem there must exist conditions for its re-emergence.^{vi} We might seek to read these works in other ways, ways that would situate medievalist fantasy in the time and place of its reappearance. Such an approach might offer up new possibilities. Patrick Curry, for example, reads *The Lord of the Rings* as 'radical nostalgia,' finding environmental messages in Tolkien and suggesting that his work has been one of the tracts of the green movement.^{vii}

In searching for a way to read utopias of violence within medievalist fantasy that will identify what is specific to the contemporary period, one possible approach is to look at how a work has disrupted tradition. Tamora Pierce's young adult quartet *Protector of the Small* (1999–2002) will be compared to the formal codes of two earlier textual heroic societies based on chivalry: Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* (published 1485) and Ramón Lull's *The Book of Ordre of Chyualry* (written circa 1276–1286).^{viii} A canonised and once-popular work, Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* has been a transmitter of the chivalric ideal to later texts and times. Lull's work was a leading medieval idealisation of chivalry, lightly fictionalised but largely discursive (a narrative strategy associated with utopian works). Pierce's ideal heroic has been chosen for the contemporary work as it is situated within the chivalric code, yet at the same time it foregrounds female protagonists and so can be seen as part of an alternative tradition energised by Andre Norton, Ursula Le Guin, Marion Zimmer Bradley and others. This change of gender marks at least one disruption to the heroic ideal, and signals the possibility that we might uncover medievalist fantasy fictions which address our times, despite their feudal trappings.

The *Protector of the Small* quartet is one of a number of series Pierce has set in her medievalist world of Tortall, a secondary world or otherworld with its own laws and culture that she describes in considerable detail. Within Pierce's world of Tortall, we can find an idealised heroic community. She describes a thriving society of knights, based on the tradition of chivalry but also containing elements of earlier heroic societies. Into this society irrupt a number of martial arts or magically inclined girls who challenge the patriarchal and homosocial feudal order by seeking entry into its power structures as knights or wielders of magic. The four books in *Protector of the Small* describe the journey of one of these figures, Keladry (Kel), who joins the heroic order as a page.

Kel has no magical powers or superhuman strength. She will be strong, but her strength will be hard-won using weights and exercise. Medievalist fantasy fictions that follow the path of utopian fiction, with details of

education, politics and social organisation, are more likely to depict heroes who have been trained and have spent time working at their heroic abilities. In this they are paradoxically more realistic than many a gritty contemporary thriller where the hero is simply endowed with the power to fight by virtue of being the hero. We can also observe that superhuman strength and other powers of the body, while celebrated in some fantasy heroes (*Superman*) have to some extent been displaced by powers of magic and intellect. With magic, any human body, however unlikely, can be transformed into an heroic one (J K Rowling's *Harry Potter*). This may be a consolatory strategy for our times, when lack of physical fitness is said to be widespread, and it certainly has shades of Freud's omnipotence of thought.^{ix} However, we can also note that bodily powers are equally likely to be displaced by other qualities such as determination and persistence over a long period of time. These qualities are those possessed by Kel and they are needed to restore or transform any society, including those of modernity.

Kel begins with a fervent belief in the ideal qualities of her heroic society. Her beliefs are soon tested when she arrives at her quarters to find her room trashed and daubed with anti-female slogans, and when she is targeted for physical and verbal abuse. At every point in her journey to knighthood it is clear to Kel that the heroic society she has entered falls short of its ideal, yet her response is not to relinquish that ideal but to both transform and restore it.

Her first project lies in the restoring of 'hazing' to its customary form. Hazing, or getting younger pages to run errands, is a tradition within this heroic society. Kel fights to prevent what hazing has become—an escalation into bullying by some of the older pages. She references the 'heart of chivalry' in her explanation:

'So I should let this go on because it's always been that way?' she asked.

Cleon, the prince, Faleron, all nodded.

'No,' she said flatly. 'I know what you mean, Cleon. I do *your* silly chores.' She tried to meet each boy's eyes. 'But this custom leads to worse things ... If we take this as pages, what about when we are knights? Do we say, Oh, now I'm going to be nice to the weak and small? Or do we do as we learned when we were pages?'^x

Kel's response is heroic and violent, and involves her single-handedly fighting with three boys older than herself every time they attempt to distort the chivalrous code. Yet this is a restorative project, and Kel is merely re-establishing a lost status quo. 'Hazing' is a practice firmly based on inequality and therefore can be read as a code for class, a form of preparation for an unequal society. It contains echoes of the 'fagging' tradition where small boys acted as servants to older boys in English boarding schools. There is little here to rebut Jackson's concerns.

Kel's next major project, however, is transformative. A young woman called Lalasa seeks refuge with Kel, who takes her as a maid. Lalasa is drawn into Kel's disputes and is subsequently kidnapped by a noble. At the trial of the kidnappers, Kel is shocked to find that their crime does not constitute an assault under law of Tortall. Lalasa is treated merely as Kel's property, and the penalty for the noble is to pay Kel for the loss of service. Law and custom are upheld, but Kel is distressed by the unfairness of such a system. Luckily, Kel is in a privileged position. As a member of the warrior class in an heroic society, she is close to the centre of power. She is able to ask for a private moment with the king, and speak against the privilege of power and class, and ask for the law to be changed:

'But by law it's right that I be paid for the inconvenience of my maid being frightened to death? Not even that *she* gets the money, but *I* do? That's not right. It's like saying common folk are slaves. Their rights are only measured in coin, not justice.' She stopped there, swallowing hard. She'd done her best to keep her voice calm.

For a very long moment the room was silent. Finally the king sighed and crossed his arms. 'It's not right,' he told Kel, to her profound shock.^{xi}

This passage raises three interesting points. Firstly, Kel's idealism has led her to speak up against injustice and lobby for change. This subject position is at odds with her world's insistence on unquestioning obedience, and stands out from the conformity exhibited by all but a few people in Kel's world (and arguably that of most societies including our own).

Secondly, the king as the agent of power through which Kel brings about her change is recognisable as a "good prince" or ideal monarch. Fantasy fiction frequently contains such an ideal, which is probably why some critics see it as a backward-looking genre. The "good prince" ideal, which operates within a monarchical society as

both an ideal and corrective, now seems anachronistic in Western society—even in Britain. Yet somehow, it is still prevalent. Read literally, this element could be interpreted as “backward-looking.”

Thirdly, Lalasa has no voice of her own. She has no way to bring about change or seek justice. When she is offered a chance to enter the audience with the king, she refuses, and the text refuses, to have her there. The heroic society is still speaking only to itself. A rescue is a matter for the rescuers, not the rescued.

Kel’s next project, however, brings about a further transformation. At first Kel is dismayed to find her first posting as a qualified knight is to command a refugee camp. With all her training, she had been hoping to be assigned ‘real’ warrior duties. Then she meets the refugees, including Fanche, a woman who survived an enemy attack and became leader of a fighting group of villagers. Fanche is very well able to speak for herself, with none of Lalasa’s timid deference. When Kel bows to Fanche, there is more than politeness at work. She is recognising her as an autonomous person. Kel knows that this recognition differentiates her from others in her warrior order:

A noble owed a duty to those who served him, but such duty was not glorious. Fairness and consideration were unnecessary; the affairs and pride of commoners were unimportant. The noble who worried too much about them was somehow weak. Kel knew her world. Her respect for common blood was a rarity.^{xii}

She begins to train the refugees in arms, incorporating them into her ideal heroic. Kel’s version of the utopia of violence is rapidly becoming egalitarian. She also encourages an elected council of refugees in the camp. All goes well until the refugee camp is attacked and the refugees and their children are kidnapped. Distressed, Kel deliberately defies orders and carries out an heroic and violent rescue of those who were in her care, saving the children from the evil mage Blayce. Kel’s passionate protection, respect for people regardless of class and attempts to empower the disempowered are at odds with the dutiful but aloof care given by the other warriors in her society to refugees.

Kel’s commitment leads her to pursue the ‘dark lord’ in *Protector of the Small*. Blayce, an evil mage, was the creator of terrifying war machines powered by souls. This could be read as a metaphor of modernity. As in the *Lord of the Rings*, machines only appear in *Protector of the Small* as instruments of evil, and machines and their master are finally defeated. There is an active opposition here to modernity, not merely a turning away. Jackson acknowledges this in Tolkien, but dismisses it as ‘naïve’ and backward-looking, stating that ‘[Tolkien] makes a naïve equation of industry with evil, referring with disgust to the “materialism of a Robot Age” and looking backwards to a medieval paradise ...’^{xiii} However, this dismissal is growing weaker with time. The need to fight against misuse of technology does not seem backward-looking in an era of ecological catastrophe from global warming due to technology. It seems radical and corrective.

Below is a comparative outline of the transformation Pierce has wrought within the textual world of Tortall. In the first column are the ideals of the heroic society, as encoded in Kel’s world. In the second are Kel’s own statements and behaviours, as an ideal warrior. The third describes Kel’s modifications:

Formal code of Tortall’s ideal heroic order (instruction on being invested as a knight)	Kel’s beliefs:	Modification by Kel of Tortall’s code:
1 Protection ‘You will be sworn to protect those weaker than you ...’ ‘You may not ignore a cry for help. It means that rich and poor, young and old, male and female may look to you for rescue, and you cannot deny them.’	I want to be like that, she told herself as she always did. I want to protect people. And I will. I will. I’ll be a hero one day, just like Mama. Just like the Lioness. ‘Nobody will kill two kittens in front of me then.’	Protection extends to animals: sparrows, kittens, dogs, horses, wild creatures.
2 Obedience ‘You will be sworn ... to obey your overlord ...’	‘Chivalry worked two ways: you gave good service to your overlord, and in return your overlord honoured your service and treated you honestly. There should be none of this adding extra conditions when all you wanted was the same chance everyone else got.’	Obedience is given. But fairness to individuals is expected in return. She later withdraws her obedience when she is ordered not to attempt rescue of refugees and children.

3 Honour '... to live in a way that honours your kingdom and your gods.' 'duty to uphold ... her own honour'		Unmodified.
4 Law 'duty to uphold the law ...'	"What just happened now? It was wrong, sire," she said firmly. ... "It's like saying the common folk are slaves ... Change the law, sire."	An individual can lobby to get the law changed.
5 Oaths 'duty... to keep her word ...'		Unmodified.

Jackson's charge of support for a conservative ruling ideology cannot really be levelled against Pierce's hero Kel. She continually pits herself against injustices of the feudal world, particularly injustices of class and gender. But can this charge be levelled against the author? After all, why situate a fantasy novel—numerous fantasy novels—in such a world? One possible reading is that the heroic ideal in a medieval setting offers a convenient metaphor of struggle of the individual. The violence then can be read as symbolic rather than literal. Acts such as standing up against injustice and of continuing to struggle for change perhaps need such a metaphor in our times, when activism is unfashionable. If such a tale were stripped of its heroic ornament and set in our own time, would it even reach us?

Pierce's novels are part of a significant body of heroic fantasy works that are in fact oppositional to most of the dualisms that Hourihan asserts are contained within such works, for example, that humans are superior to animals, free men to slaves, men to women, reason to passion, soul to body, white to black.^{xiv} The works of Norton, Le Guin and Pierce form part of an alternative tradition that invests women with heroic roles, inverts racial stereotypes, opposes dominance and accords animals with consciousness and respect. The recognition given to animals in medievalist fantasy and their inclusion at heroic moments is particularly interesting. Many medievalist fantasy works with female heroes foreground telepathic and sentient animals. The dragon evolves from a monster in *Beowulf* to a telepathic companion in McCaffrey and the mystic other in Le Guin. Is it contemporary eco-consciousness that makes this possible, or perhaps even necessary? De-centring the human must allow or imply a consciousness that is other.

It should also be noted that the task of constructing an entire world as the 'other' from which to speak to modernity is a difficult task for a fiction writer. Medievalism offers a textual dress-up room rich in ready-to-wear characters and settings, a creative space of play and invention. Louise Fradenburg points convincingly to the pleasures of excess in medievalism, 'even excess privation,' in its heady stylisations of gender, sexuality, militarisation, combat and survival.^{xv} Many of the problems that we continue to grapple with today such as the uses/abuses of power, the control of land, the nature of work, private vs. public interests and the ethics of war find potent symbols in medievalist iconography. The medieval also has the advantage of being associated with modernity's alter-ego, pre-industrial life.

The next comparison is between the knights of Tortall and the Round Table Oath of the knights in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur*. Although written in the late medieval period (circa 1470), Malory is already engaged in medievalising, both drawing on previous texts and creatively working with Arthurian/chivalric material.

Formal code of Malory's ideal heroic order (round table oath, <i>Le Morte D'Arthur</i>, based on Caxton's version, Book 3 Chapter 15)	<i>Protector of the Small</i> example	Modification of the Round Table code in <i>Protector of the Small</i>
'... never to do outrageousness nor murder ...'		Unmodified
'... always to flee treason ...'	"You have an oath to the Crown!" Kel shouted ... "This is treason, you sapskulls! You can't just decide when you're in service to the realm and when you're not!" "Like you have?" Neal asked sweetly.'	Modified by Kel, who decides to rescue the refugees who were under her protection. All of her friends follow her in this quest. Avoiding treason is less important than the duty to save vulnerable people, or honouring friendship loyalties.

'... also, by no means to be cruel, but to give mercy unto him that asketh mercy, upon pain of forfeiture of their worship and lordship of King Arthur for evermore ...'	She pressed until a drop of blood ran down the razor's edge. "'Yield for the crown's mercy," she ordered.'	Unmodified.
'...and always to do ladies, damosels, and gentlewomen succour, upon pain of death ...' The Winchester manuscript shows Malory also wrote the rights of women into his formal code, but the passages were deleted prior to printing.	'You will be sworn to protect those weaker than you ...' 'You may not ignore a cry for help. It means that rich and poor, young and old, male and female may look to you for rescue, and you cannot deny them.'	This is a major extension from women to other groups. Kel not only fully accepts her duty to protect people of any age or class but further extends it by assisting people in any walk of life even if they haven't cried for help. Kel also extends her protection and assistance to animals.
'Also, that no man take no battles in a wrongful quarrel for no law [<i>love in the Winchester manuscript</i>], nor for no world's goods.'		Unmodified

Pierce's ideal heroic has significantly shifted the centre of the chivalric ideal away from Malory's young and beautiful aristocratic women, and towards all manner of people asking for rescue. In contrast to Malory, whose narrative shows little interest in those outside the aristocratic class, Pierce's commoners are described in detail, and given individual identity, names, histories and characters. Pierce's ideal heroic order establishes and provides armed protection to refugee camps, and helps protect farms and villages from raiders. Through her hero Keladry, Pierce takes this transformation even further, rescuing the most oppressed child servant, as well as animals including the smallest (sparrows) and least likeable (griffin).

After Malory's class- and gender-centred ideal, it is interesting to compare Pierce to the much earlier idealisation of Ramón Lull:

'The offyce' extracts of the formal code of Lull's ideal heroic order (<i>The Book the the Ordre of Chyualry</i>, Caxton version)	Formal code of Tortall's ideal heroic order (instruction on being invested as a knight)	Modifications
'The offyce of a knyght is to mayntene and deffende the holy feyth catholyque'	'... to live in a way that honours your kingdom and your gods.'	Tortall has multiple gods, such as nature spirits and numina. Kel is given a mission by a god that dwells in the Chamber of the Ordeal. This is not however a break with tradition; non-Christian elements are strong in the romance tradition.
'Thoffyce of a knyght is to mayntene and deffende his lord worldly or terryen'		Not contained in the formal code, but in practice largely unmodified.
'Thoffyce of a knyght is to mayntene the londe for by cause that the drede of the comyn people haue of the knyghtes they laboure & cultyue the erthe for fere leste they shold be destroyed'		The dominance of the warrior class over the agricultural class is not so severe in Tortall. However, it is arguably still present, and leads to some of the injustices that trouble Kel.
'Thoffyce of a knyght is to mayntene and deffende wymmen wydowes and orphanes and men dyseased and not puyssaunt ne stronge For lyke as customme and reason is that the grettest and moost myghty helpe the feble and lasse and that they haue recours to the grete'	'You will be sworn to protect those weaker than you ...' 'You may not ignore a cry for help. It means that rich and poor, young and old, male and female may look to you for rescue, and you cannot deny them.'	Unmodified in Tortall's formal code.

<p>‘Thoffyce of a knyght is to haue a castel and horse for to kepe the wayes and for to deffende them that labouren the londes and the erthe and they ought to haue townes and Cytees for to holde ryght to the peple And for to assemple in a place men of many dyuerse craftes whiche ben moche necessarye to the oderenaunce of this world to kepe and mayntene the lyf of man and of woman.’</p>		<p>All knights in Tortall have horses and some have castles. Lull also recognises that not every knight can have land; some will need to serve others.</p> <p>In Tortall, towns and cities are not explicitly assembled by the warrior class.</p>
<p>‘Thoffyce of a kynght is also to enserche for theues robbours and other wykked folke For to make them to be punysshed’</p>	<p>‘duty to uphold the law ...’</p>	<p>Hunting down ‘thieves, robbers and other wicked folk’ is very much part of the work of the knights of Tortall. As suggested by Lull, some knights also act as judges.</p> <p>In Tortall, not all ‘wicked folk’ are human; some are centaurs.</p>

Lull’s is a utopian vision, complete with suggestions that knights be educated in their duties and a list of ‘nots’ (a typical feature of utopian writing). Lull’s ‘nots’ include not doing wrong and force to women, widows or orphans, and not robbing and destroying the feeble—‘For this is wyckedness cruelte & tyranny.’^{xvi} Lull argues that the ‘feeble and lesser’ have recourse to ‘the greatest and most mighty’ for assistance, both by custom and reason. This and other passages in Lull could also be seen as an expression of part of what we now call “human rights,” despite frequent claims that this concept did not begin to emerge until the late medieval or early modern period.^{xvii}

Kel’s commitment to ‘protect the small’ is entirely consistent with Lull’s broader vision. To see how Pierce’s world differs from Lull’s, we will need to go further into the narrative. One interesting shift in *Protector of the Small* is in the role of the victim. In many heroic works, the very act of heroic rescue is loaded with the problematic dichotomies that Hourihan has identified. Those rescued are typically ‘other’: women, people of other races, slaves. Recall the old silent movie of the woman tied to the train tracks awaiting the arrival of the male hero? The act of carrying out a rescue often glorifies the hero by disempowering and subjugating the victim. Not only are the rescued too weak to save themselves, but this helplessness appears to be related to their very difference of gender, race or class. Lull describes victims who are women, orphans, the feeble and diseased. Although a positive of these narratives is that the hero values ‘the other’ by caring enough to help them (chivalry is much preferable to indifference or brutality), the ennobling of the hero relies on portraying women and others as too weak to save themselves. We can see numerous examples in fantasy and other heroic genres. The role of the Pakistani boy in Susan Cooper’s *The Dark is Rising* series is to be a victim who can be saved by Will Stanton’s brother. In J K Rowling, the Muggles are dangled upside down by the Death Eaters, helplessly unable to save themselves without the intervention of Harry Potter or his friends. Not only in genre fiction does this occur: a ‘realist’ work such as Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* gives a white child more heroic power to save black lives than black people affected by racism. Yet every one of these texts would be read, correctly, as carrying anti-discriminatory messages.

Pierce on the other hand makes serious attempts to empower the rescued in her treatment of the heroic. Immediately after Kel rescues her maid Lalasa from a man’s unwanted advances, she begins to train Lalasa in self-defence. However, Lalasa’s true self-empowerment comes, not from mastering violence, but from an outstanding talent as a tailoress which will ultimately lead to her independence and success. This talent is juxtaposed in the narrative to show that it is comparable to that of the warrior:

‘You really like sewing, don’t you?’ asked Kel, who hated it.
Lalasa nodded. ‘I’m better than a lot of the maids that serve the young court ladies, Tian says. And it’s peaceful. Just you, and the cloth, and getting everything right.’
Kel thought of those moments on Peachblossom’s back, when she lowered her lance at the quintain, and knew in the feel of her horse, and the weapon, and her arm, that she had it perfectly. ‘I know what you mean,’ she murmured.^{xviii}

As the narrative progresses, Kel makes further efforts to re-empower the victims who come under her heroic protection. Groups of refugees are trained by Kel in various drills and weapons, to the point where they are able

to help defend their fort against Scanran raiding parties. When the refugees are finally captured and Kel sets off alone to save them, she is confident that the refugees can assist in their own rescue—which they do.

Yet at the very end of the series the conventions of the triumphal violence mode finally overwhelm the narrative. Kel's final, climactic battle is to kill the evil mage who has imprisoned the refugee children. In this struggle the refugees are denied the right to participate, despite their children's lives being in danger:

'But our children,' a refugee protested. 'Oughtn't we go after them?'

'I have a reasonable certainty that we will meet killing devices,' Kel said. The refugees paled. 'In any event, I need to move fast, and I need to know you're safe. That means you go home ... If I live, I swear I'll bring your little ones back. But I can't be worried about protecting you as well.'

'You could die out there,' whispered Olga Valestone.^{xix}

The narrative now focuses intensely on Kel as hero. She meets a child seer who announces that Kel's arrival has been foretold. Kel's band of heroes captures the castle, but Kel alone challenges and kills the evil mage who has been the 'dark lord' of the series. In the final pages, the hero's role as rescuer is confirmed through solo battle and slaughter of a powerful, evil opponent. To this extent, *Protector of the Small* is still firmly within the masculine code described by Hourihan. Along the way, however, *The Protector of the Small* quartet pushes the boundaries of the ideal heroic considerably, allowing many of those protected to partially (but only partially) shed their subjugated positions.

Returning to the question of whether medievalist fantasy is inevitably regressive, it can be observed that while many of the broad elements of a traditional heroic ideal are present in the *Protector of the Small*, their detail has been very much modified. Most strikingly, Kel works actively in the series to level out inequities, to a far greater degree than the earlier medievalist texts. She attempts to empower victims and extends her protection to other species. Perhaps it is significant that Pierce's and other similar works appeared after the 20th century's vast catastrophes, when, in the name of the various state ideologies, unprecedented numbers of people were slaughtered or displaced; a period that has not yet ended and is increasingly haunted by awareness of its deteriorating natural environments. The rights of both people and species have become more urgent as an ideal, a moral *telos*. We can conclude that medievalist fantasy is not *necessarily* pure tradition or archetype. Further, given the themes developed by Pierce and other writers, nor can the works be read as *purely* compensatory or consolatory.

Of course, there are many objections to the violent heroic even when accompanied by ethics or a moral *telos*. Some commentators object to depictions of heroic violence, on the ground that it provides training for violence in a world where most actual violent expression will be abusive rather than heroic.^{xx} Some see a danger in real-world enactments of idealised heroic societies which may easily shift into brutality, as the fascist period in Europe proved only too well.^{xxi} Some see traditional hero stories as inherently about masculinity and claim that they devalue women, even where authors attempt to insert female heroes.^{xxii} Some see heroic works as defending state power, with heroes as authority figures who wield state-sanctioned violence.^{xxiii} Historically, heroic works have played a role in supporting violent conquest and colonisation.^{xxiv} Heroic societies are dangerously fuelled by the need for ongoing conflict (endless supplies of Scanran raiders).

Yet, as we have seen, both contemporary and medieval heroic works can (and frequently do) privilege individual rights over power, fair treatment over bullying, values of care over those of domination. We might turn the question around and ask, whose purposes might be served by depictions of ideal heroes, including medievalist heroes? The oppressor's or the oppressed's? The bully's or the victim's? Those who would construct our subjectivity for their own ends, or those that would resist this? Those who would annihilate difference, or those who would celebrate it? There is only one possible answer: hero stories and the violence mode are available to all these groups. The qualifier is that perhaps they are not equally available. However, insofar as a group can articulate and justify a socio-ethical framework which incorporates a degree of violence, the ideal heroic is available.

There *has* been transmission of a hero myth related to masculinity, as Hourihan points out. It often *does* contain an ego-fulfilling fantasy, manifesting a desire for the omnipotence of thought, as the Freudians argue. Fantasy *may* offer consolation, as Jackson claims, and distraction from reality. All this can be operating, and yet these texts—with all their dreamlike enchantment or escapist pleasure (depending on your point of view)—are nonetheless still taking part in the discourses of our times. A violent heroic utopia set in an idealised medievalist world can still be an artefact of modernity as much as tradition. Pierce's *Protector of the Small* represents our times in its ambivalence about technology, expansion of the *telos* of human rights and growing respect for the environment and animals. It seems that the heroic, while it may be a received form, is not necessarily

masculinist, and not necessarily 'a single story' or monomyth. It may even owe its survival across time and place to its ability to represent diverse perspectives and mutate with changing ideals.

REFERENCES

- ⁱ Frederic Jameson, "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre," *New Literary History* 7, no. 1 (1975): 142.
- ⁱⁱ Rosemary Jackson, *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (London: Routledge, 1998), 155.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 154.
- ^{iv} Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1993), 30ff.
- ^v Margery Hourihan, *Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children's Literature* (London: Routledge, 1997), 1.
- ^{vi} Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).
- ^{vii} Patrick Curry, *Defending Middle-Earth: Tolkien, Myth and Modernity* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 1997), 26.
- ^{viii} Tamora Pierce, *First Test* (London: Scholastic Press, 2000); Pierce, *Page* (London: Scholastic Press, 2000); Pierce, *Squire* (London: Scholastic Press, 2001); Pierce, *Lady Knight* (London: Scholastic Press, 2002); Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur* (New York: Hyperion, 2004); Ramón Lull, *The Book of Ordre of Chyualry*, trans. William Caxton, ed. A.T.P. Byles (Oxford: Early English Text Society, 1971).
- ^{ix} Sigmund Freud, "Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thought," in *Totem and Taboo* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co Ltd, undated; first published 1913), 147.
- ^x Pierce, *First Test*, 155.
- ^{xi} Pierce, *Squire*, 162–163.
- ^{xii} Pierce, *Lady Knight*, 70.
- ^{xiii} Jackson, 155.
- ^{xiv} Hourihan, 2.
- ^{xv} Louise Fradenburg, "'So That We Might Speak of Them': Enjoying the Middle Ages," *New Literary History* 28, no. 2 (1997), 205–230.
- ^{xvi} Lull, 39.
- ^{xvii} See, for example, Kenneth Minogue, "The History of the Idea of Human Rights," in *The Human Rights Reader*, ed. Walter Laqueur and Barry Rubin (New York: New American Library, 1979), 5–7.
- ^{xviii} Pierce, *Page*, 153–4.
- ^{xix} Pierce, *Lady Knight*, 323.
- ^{xx} Kevin Klement, "Is Pacifism Irrational?" *Peace Review* 11, no. 1 (1999): 168–169.
- ^{xxi} Paul Shore, "Invisible History," *The Humanist* 60, no. 6 (2000): 18–21.
- ^{xxii} Hourihan, 206.
- ^{xxiii} Henry Taylor and Carol Dozier, "Television Violence, African-Americans, and Social Control 1950–1976," *Journal of Black Studies* 14, no. 2 (1983), 107–36.
- ^{xxiv} Amy Kaplan, "Romancing the Empire: The Embodiment of American Masculinity in the Popular Historical Novel of the 1890s," *American Literary History* 2, no. 4 (1990), 659–90.